United Nations A/HRC/30/NGO/44

General Assembly

Distr.: General
3 September 2015

English only

Human Rights Council
Thirtieth session
Agenda item 10
Technical assistance and capacity-building

Written statement* submitted by the World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 August 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.15-14939(E)

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Ukraine's human rights at risk

The World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations wishes again to focus the attention of the international community on the ongoing violation of human rights that has become Ukraine's daily reality since the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and its undeclared war on Ukraine's sovereignty. Despite sanctions, the Russian Federation continues to occupy Crimea; and despite the Minsk ceasefire agreement, the amassing of Russian troops along the borders and within Ukraine's Donbas region and attacks on Ukrainian forces have not stopped. Regrettably, in the absence of an effective global response to what is a clear violation of international law, Ukrainians, on the eve of the 25th anniversary of Ukraine's independence, are sacrificing their lives, the highest possible price one can pay, for their insistence on a chance to enjoy the most fundamental of freedoms in their own country.

Ukraine is currently facing its most dramatic challenge since attaining statehood. The "hybrid war" conducted against Ukraine has taken more than 6,450 military and civilian lives, including over 600 women and girls (as reported for the period of mid-April 2014 – June 3, 2015) and has caused grave physical and psychological injury to a heartbreakingly large number of young people among the more than 16,000 wounded. It has also resulted in the displacement of a growing number of Ukraine's citizens (over 1.4 million internally displaced persons as of July 2015), among whom women and those in their care are the most vulnerable[1].

The World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organization will welcome all further attempts of the international community to resolve the situation in Ukraine, as the declarations, sanctions and ceasefire agreement have not been successful. The situation in Ukraine remains volatile. Human rights violations have intensified against the Crimean Tatars loyal to Ukraine, who recently conducted their World Congress of Crimean Tatars in Ankara under threat and intimidation. Also, according to the Human Rights Office on June 1, 2015, there is grave concern over the: « *serious human rights violations and abuses that persist in eastern Ukraine, including shelling, executions, arbitrary and illegal detentions, torture, ill-treatment, human trafficking and the lack of justice and accountability, as well as deprivation of economic and social rights that are deeply affecting the five million people living in the conflict-affected areas* »[2].

The burgeoning numbers of those internally displaced constitutes an unprecedented challenge for Ukraine, which is struggling to provide assistance. Especially affected are women and children, but also entire families who have fled from active battlegrounds of the Donbas, as well as the elderly, infirm and institutionalized who have been in urgent need of evacuation. The Ukrainian Government has adopted a law "On ensuring the rights and freedoms of internally displaced persons" (2014) providing guidance for the registration and coordination of assistance to IDPs in need of more secure quarters. However, the IDP experience involves many difficult hurdles, such as family reunification, integration into new places of residence, often dealing with inadequate living conditions. All of these problems require consistent support of Ukraine's government and the help of the international community.

The overall situation in the Donbas region remains tense. Conditions are worsening daily, making life a struggle for the most basic of human needs. The presence of military personnel and equipment terrifies civilians, and hinders their freedom of expression. On August 16, 2015, a Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine recorded ceasefire violations in several locations, in particular around the Donetsk airport and in the area around Luhansk[3], which caused serious damage to residential buildings and infrastructure. The situation in occupied Crimea is also worrying. Ukrainian citizens are deprived of their nationality and the right to freedom of speech, press, and assembly. The indigenous Crimean Tatars, who opposed the Russian seizure of their homeland, are being harassed and persecuted. There have been kidnappings, disappearances, and murders of Crimean Tatar activists, in addition to the retraction of their community's civic rights of assembly and representation.

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[1] http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_ukraine_situation_update_30_may_-_5_june_2015.pdf
[2] http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16026&LangID=E
[3] Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine based on information received as of 19:30 (Kyiv time), 16 August 2015 // http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/177826

As an international network of Ukrainian diasporan women's organizations, we are especially concerned for the women in our homeland. We raised awareness, during the international 16 Days Campaign against Gender-Based Violence, of the incidence of sexualized torture in the militarized zones. These incidents of intimidation and retaliation through gender-based violence, first reported by international human rights observers, have been confirmed by eyewitnesses and victims, a few of whom agreed to speak publicly about their ordeals[4]. Their stories also reflect the reality of the widespread use of psychological pressure and threats against residents of eastern Ukraine and Crimea. We have also become more acutely aware of persistent gender stereotypes that become prominent in a wartime context and recognize patterns of discrimination that continue to undermine the promises of the Ukrainian Constitution (1991) and Ukraine's laws. The law of Ukraine (2005) «On Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men » needs application to the particular vulnerability of women in the militarized context.

As activists on the EuroMaidan and as members of Ukraine's military forces, Ukraine's women have demonstrated great courage as partners in the fight for democracy and freedom. We express our extreme concern for the fate of Ukrainian air pilot, Lt. Nadiya Savchenko, who was captured on the territory of Ukraine and kidnapped into Russia where she has been illegally imprisoned under false charges since June of 2014. The continued detention of Ms. Savchenko who is a deputy of Ukraine's Parliament and a member of the Permanent Delegation of Ukraine to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, is plainly a political affair. Furthermore, Nadiya Savchenko is one of several such political prisoners detained by the Russian Federation for what widely recognized as show trials. We are equally concerned over the recent sentencing of the Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and the Ukrainian activist Olexander Kolchenko. We appeal for the close monitoring of the fate of these and other *de facto* prisoners of war held by the Russian Federation.

Regrettably, these events are part of a familiar pattern. They mirror the style of aggression perpetrated by the Russian Federation against other former Soviet Socialist Republics, Moldova and Georgia. Even more regrettable is the fact that the need for militarized self-defense may severely hinder Ukraine's implementation of reforms and treaties that could bring the country closer to the international standards expressed with such hope and optimism in the goals and targets of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. On a more optimistic note, the undeclared war has spurred a massive volunteer response in Ukraine, carrying humanitarian aid to the IDPs and those serving in the militarized zone. It has given birth to reform minded projects. Most significantly, it has served to ignite among Ukraine's people a stronger sense of self-esteem and purpose.

The World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations calls on the international community to support the Ukrainian government in its obligation to ensure the human rights for all of its citizens; to embrace the defense of Lt. Nadiya Savchenko and other prisoners of war; and to redouble efforts to promote a climate of accountability and respect for international law. We urge the international community to go beyond the usual declarative positions and to work actively and concretely with government and civil society representatives for full human rights and freedom in Ukraine.

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[4] We refer to the television documentary, "Tortured Femininity," which was produced in Kyiv by Ukraine Today, and first aired on March 13, 2015.